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## Five Comments on Britain's EU Settlement

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Article text:

*Following the end of the renegotiation of the UK's EU membership and the announcement of the EU referendum date, **Anthony Salamone** considers some of the elements behind the agreement and forthcoming referendum.*

The UK's renegotiation of its EU membership concluded on Friday at the European Council in Brussels. The text of the settlement is contained in the Council [conclusions](#). We also now know that the EU referendum will take place on Thursday 23 June 2016. Some comments on the renegotiation and referendum:

1. **This is an historic agreement.** It is the first time that a Member State has unilaterally sought (and achieved) a renegotiation of its own terms of EU membership. This process has been entirely centred on the UK. In practice, however, many elements of the deal will impact the other Member States and the EU more generally. More to the point, how long before the next country seeks its own deal? The future of European integration, which inherently depends upon a high degree of policy harmony and/or unity, could be put into question in the months and years ahead.

2. **The deal combines symbols and substance.** Stating that the EU is a 'multi-currency Union', opting the UK out of 'ever closer union' and reiterating that states are responsible for its own national security are highly symbolic. The new 'red card' on subsidiarity for national parliaments is interesting, but it is unlikely to be used often. Parliaments would need to work together to exercise this right and, for different reasons, they may well not be interested in doing so. The restrictions on the free movement of workers (ie access to in-work benefits) represent a fundamental change in how the EU has functioned. The measures are relatively modest and unlikely to reduce the movement of EU citizens into the UK, which is ostensibly their objective. However, the precedent that non-discrimination on the basis of nationality can be made flexible in this way is a significant concession on the part of the other Member States.

3. **Its impact on the campaign will be mixed.** The content of the deal may not exert substantial influence on (undecided) voters. Most of it is technical and legalistic. The principles which the agreement is meant to amend are also not particularly well known amongst the UK public. However, that is not to say that the deal is unimportant. The fact of simply having a deal (whatever it contains) plays into the narrative that the EU has been 'reformed' and is therefore now more acceptable. Instrumentalisation of the deal could sway voters one way or the other.

**4. The referendum date has broader implications.** The decision by the UK government on the June date raises questions about the impact on the devolved institutions and local government. Devolved elections in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland and local elections in England and Wales are scheduled for Thursday 5 May 2016. That leaves just under seven weeks (48 days) between the elections and the referendum. It is possible that the campaigns will become conflated with each other. The emergence of 'Europe' as a central issue in the May elections could also alter the dynamics of the respective campaigns. More broadly, the four months between the announcement of the date and the referendum is not a particularly long time to campaign (compared for instance to the Scotland independence referendum), although low-level campaigning and preparation have been ongoing for some time.

**5. The vote won't settle the UK's relationship with the EU.** The referendum is only one step in a wider process. If the UK votes to stay in the EU, the *status quo* of membership will continue, as modified by the changes provided for in the settlement. Arguments around EU membership will continue and opponents are likely to seek a second referendum in the future. If the UK votes to leave the EU, years-long discussions will take place to determine the new arrangements for UK-EU relations. This new relationship will presumably need to be legitimised in some way, perhaps through a vote in Parliament or even another referendum. In any case, the debate will continue, at varying intensities, for the foreseeable future. The next four months are likely to be particularly intense indeed.

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